The Saek refer to themselves and their language as *threɛk*^{6} (Siamese and Lao [*sɛɛk*]; Siamese *sɛɛk*^{2}): *thay*^{5} *threɛk*^{6} 'Saek people'; *cian*^{5} *threɛk*^{6} 'Saek language'. In English-language publications, the spelling *Saek* is used, and in French *Sèk*. Morev's 1988 study in Russian uses the Cyrillic equivalent of

Sek. Chinese-language publications use the character pronounced *Shi* (pinyin romanization; Wade-Giles romanization *Shih*).**

A member of the Northern branch of the Tai language family, Saek is spoken in Northeastern Thailand in Nakhon Phanom province and directly across the river in Laos in Khammouane province. The actual number of villages with Saek speakers is small. In Thailand, four villages, all in Nakhon Phanom province, are generally cited: Baan^{3} ʔAat^{6}saa^{1}maat^{5} (Siamese Baan^{3} ʔAat^{2}saa^{5}maat^{3}), five kilometers north of Nakhon Phanom on the banks of the Mekhong River on the road to Uthen, also known locally as Baan^{3} Khɔɔŋ^{2}, and Baan^{3} Phay^{6} Lɔɔm^{3} (Siamese Baan^{3} Phay^{2} Lɔɔm^{4}), apparently the same as Baan^{3} Saw^{1}law^{3} and one mile inland from Ban At Samat, both located in Nakhon Phanom district; Baan^{3} Dɔŋ^{1}sa^{6}mɔɔ^{4} (Siamese Baan^{3} Dɔɔn^{1}sa^{2}mɔɔ^{5}) in Sii^{1}soŋ^{1}khraam^{4} district; and Baan^{3} Baa^{1}vaa^{3} in Kiŋ^{6}naa^{4}vaa^{3} district. Other Saek villages, evidently abandoned, include Baan^{3} Thaa^{5} Vaay^{4}, located between Nakhon Phanom and Ban At Samat, and Baan^{3} Naa^{4}la?^{6}vaay^{4}, on the road to Sakon Nakhon. In his 1988 study of Saek, Morev (p. 9) lists the same four villages in Thailand.

As for Laos, Morev (p. 9) claims there are about ten Saek villages in Khammouane province, located in the districts of Nhommarat, Mahaxay, Kham Khet, and Tha Khek. Texts collected by Gedney list the villages Baan^{3} Thɔɔk^{5} (Siamese Baan^{3} Thɔɔk^{3}), Baan^{3} Phoo^{4} Kham^{3} (Siamese Baan^{3} Phoo^{1} Kham^{3}) and Baan^{3} Thaa^{5} Khɛɛ^{4}. In a notebook entry, Gedney also lists in Siamese Baan^{3} Phaa^{5} Thuŋ^{1}, with a true Saek

population, and Baan^{3} Phoon^{3} ŋaam^{1}, with a half-Saek and half-Lao population; in Vietnam, he notes further, the villages of Baan^{3} Trɤɤŋ^{3} and Baan^{3} Teen^{1} are also said to have Saek inhabitants. Although population figures for the Saek are not reliable, Morev, citing the Committee for Nationality Affairs of Laos, gives the Saek population in Laos to be about 5,000 in the 1980s and the Thai population to be around 2,000 (p. 9).

The history of the Saek is largely restricted to tales told by the villagers. The texts collected by Gedney place the Saek originally in northern Vietnam, where, because of the scarcity of food, the Saek killed and ate a white elephant owned by a local ruler. Forced to flee because of the heavy fine, they moved into Laos and then into Thailand (see **Texts IV and V**). Morev (p. 10) cites a different tale from an informant in the village of Bateng, who relates that the Saek were forced by the Thai to the Bangkok area where a canal was being built around the city. When the construction was completed, the Saek were released, and they settled in the present day region. Morev dates these events to the nineteenth century. Former Saek villages in Vietnam include Baan^{3} Buk^{4}naa^{4}tɤɤ^{3}, Baan^{3} Sin^{4}naa^{4}mɤɤy^{4}, Baan^{3} Trɤɤŋ^{1}, Baan^{3} Thruu^{3}, and the city of Sɔɔŋ^{4}.

French travelers and researchers in Indochina first noted the Saek in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Largely impressionistic, their short word lists and brief grammars can be found in Aymonier (1895), Rivière (1902), Macy (1905), Maspero (1912), and Bonifacy (1919). In 1930, Seidenfaden

classifed Saek as a Mon-Khmer language; he notes, "Philologically speaking, the Saek undoubtedly belong to the Mon-Khmer group, but their language is much mixed with Lao" (p. 91). Credner (1935) also lists Saek as Mon-Khmer, as do Blanchard (1957) and Lebar, Hickey, and Musgrave (1964). In a series of papers in the 1950s and 1960s, André-G. Haudricourt concluded that Saek was a Tai language belonging to the Northern branch of the Tai family. Around the same time, Fraisse (1950:338) also refers to Saek as a Thai language. In a 1965 presentation to the Linguistic Society of America and in a 1969 lecture given in Siamese at the Siam Society in Bangkok, Gedney supported Haudricourt's placement, and then confirmed it in a 1970 publication based on his own extensive fieldwork. Gedney produced other studies in 1976 and 1982. (For details, see **Introduction to Selected Saek Articles**.) Saek continues to be of great interest to specialists in Tai linguists, with recent studies made by Thongkum (1976), Khanitthanan (1975, 1976), Benedict (1979), Morev (1988), and Boltz (1991).

Gedney conducted research on Saek in a series of field trips in 1964, 1965, 1966, 1968, and 1976. Most of his data were provided by a wide range of informants, all from Baan^{3} ʔAat^{6}saa^{1}maat^{5}. Background on each of the informants appears with the texts they provided (see **Texts**). He also interviewed a number of individuals from Baan^{3} Doŋ^{1}sa^{6}mɔɔ^{4} and Baan^{3} Phay^{6} Lɔɔm^{3}, where the dialect is essentially the same. In the course of his fieldwork, Gedney discovered significant differences between speech groups composed

of the older and younger generation (see **Sociolinguistic Features**). Already at the time of these interviews, these generational differences were disappearing and probably by now have all but disappeared. With the hegemony of the Thai and Lao language today, the status of the Saek language remains in doubt, most young speakers seeing greater opportunities, both economically and otherwise, in Thai and Lao.

Saek has no native writing system. Therefore, all the data in this monograph are in a phonetic transcription based on the International Phonetic Alphabet, with the exception of the palatal semivowel which is written *y* rather than *j*. In his earlier writings, Gedney used *ɨ* and *ə* for the back unrounded vowels as a matter of typographical convenience. Based on Gedney's recommendation, to show that these vowels are back and not central, the symbols *ɯ* and *ʏ*, respectively, have been substituted for the original ones

William J. Gedney's

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